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Passport and Visa Photo Requirements Across 11 Countries: A Comparative Reference of Size, Background, and Biometric Rules

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ABSTRACT

There is no universal passport photo. We compiled the official government requirements for 11 passport and visa standards, and no two countries share the same combination of size, background, and glasses rules. A photo that passes for a United States passport, 51 by 51 mm on a white background with no glasses, is the wrong size for the United Kingdom, the wrong background for Germany, and larger than it needs to be for a Chinese visa. About 90,500 people a month search "passport photo requirements" without being told that the answer depends entirely on where they are applying.

0.1 Download the full study as a PDF

Prefer a formatted, citable reference? This comparison is also available as a journal-style PDF, *"Passport and Visa Photo Requirements Across 11 Countries,"* with the full spec table, sources, and the raw dataset as CSV. → **Download the PDF (journal format)**

Keywords: passport photo requirements, passport photo size by country, us passport photo requirements, uk passport photo size, schengen visa photo size, passport photo background color

KEY FINDINGS

- Across 11 official passport and visa standards there are four different photo sizes: the 35 x 45 mm ICAO standard (UK, Schengen, Japan, India, Australia, Germany, Ireland), the US 51 x 51 mm square, the Chinese visa 33 x 48 mm, and Canada's outlier 50 x 70 mm, nearly double the standard area.
- Backgrounds split in two. The US, Canada, India and China want plain white; the UK, Schengen, Germany and Australia want plain grey or cream. A white background is a common reason UK photos are rejected.
- Glasses are banned outright only in the United States (since 2016) and Australia. Most other countries allow clear, non-tinted, glare-free glasses.
- Even the way the head is measured differs: crown-to-chin (US, UK, Japan), chin-to-crown framing at 70 to 80 percent (Schengen), chin-to-hairline (Germany), or a face-coverage percentage (India, 80 to 85 percent).
- Digital upload limits range from 40 to 120 KB for a Chinese visa to as much as 10 MB for a UK passport, a 100-fold difference for the same face.

1. Why there is no universal passport photo

Figure 1. Passport and visa photo sizes drawn to scale: China visa 33x48 mm, the 35x45 mm standard used by the UK, EU, Japan, India and Australia, the US square 51x51 mm, and Canada at 50x70 mm.

Every country builds on the same international baseline, ICAO Document 9303, which defines a machine-readable travel document photo: a neutral, front-facing, evenly lit head on a plain background. But ICAO leaves the exact numbers, print size, background shade, whether glasses are allowed, to each issuing authority. The result is a patchwork. The 35 x 45 mm print is the closest thing to a world standard, used by the UK, the Schengen area, Japan, India, Australia, Germany and Ireland, but the two largest passport issuers people search for, the US and Canada, both sit outside it, and China's visa uses its own 33 x 48 mm frame.

This matters because photo booths, print shops and phone apps often produce one default size, usually the local one. If you are a US resident applying for a UK visa, or an Indian citizen applying for a US visa, the photo your local booth prints is very likely the wrong specification.

2. The four things that vary most

2.1 Photo size

The single biggest difference is physical size. The US and India both use squares and rectangles that differ from the ICAO rectangle, and Canada is the clear outlier: its 50 x 70 mm photo has an area of 3,500 mm squared, more than double the 1,575 mm squared of the 35 x 45 mm standard. If you only remember one thing, it is that "2x2 inch" (the US size) and "35 x 45 mm" (most of the rest of the world) are not interchangeable.

2.2 Background colour

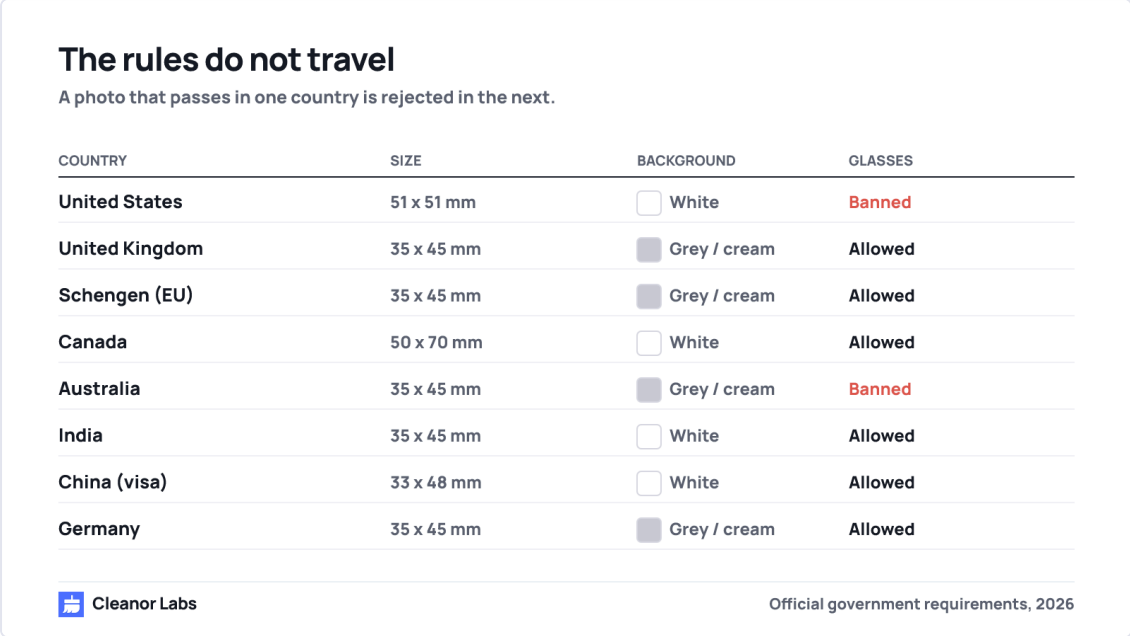

Figure 2. Passport photo rules by country: sizes differ, backgrounds split between white (US, Canada, India, China) and grey or cream (UK, Schengen, Australia, Germany), and glasses are banned in the US and Australia but allowed elsewhere.

Background is the rule most people get wrong, because the two big conventions directly contradict each other. The US, Canada, India and China require a plain white or near-white background. The UK, Germany, Australia and the Schengen states require a plain light grey or cream background, and the UK guidance specifically lists "cream or light grey" without listing white. A crisp white background, the obvious "correct" choice for an American, is exactly what can get a UK or German photo bounced for lack of contrast.

2.3 Glasses

The belief that you must remove your glasses is only universally true in two of the countries we checked. The United States banned glasses in all new passport and visa photos on 1 November 2016, after glare and reflections became the single largest cause of rejected photos. Australia also bans them unless you cannot remove them for medical reasons. Everywhere else, clear prescription glasses are allowed as long as the frames do not cover the eyes and there is no glare, reflection or tint. China even states this explicitly, permitting eyeglasses except thick-rimmed, tinted or glare glasses.

2.4 How they measure your head

There is not even agreement on how big your head should be in the frame. The US and UK measure crown-to-chin (25 to 35 mm and 29 to 34 mm respectively). Schengen frames the face at 70 to 80 percent of the image height. Germany measures chin-to-hairline at 32 to 36 mm, a different reference point from Japan's crown-to-chin 34 mm. India abandons millimetres entirely and asks that the face fill 80 to 85 percent of the photo. Two photos that are both technically "correct" can therefore show noticeably different head sizes.

3. The full comparison

Country / document	Size	Head height	Background	Glasses	Recency
United States, passport	51 x 51 mm (2x2 in)	25 to 35 mm	White / off-white	Banned	6 months
United States, visa	51 x 51 mm (2x2 in)	25 to 35 mm (50 to 69%)	White / off-white	Banned	6 months
United Kingdom, passport	35 x 45 mm	29 to 34 mm	Cream / light grey	Allowed	1 month
Schengen, visa	35 x 45 mm	32 to 36 mm (70 to 80%)	Light grey / plain	Allowed	6 months
Canada, passport	50 x 70 mm	31 to 36 mm	White	Allowed	6 months
Australia, passport	35 x 45 mm	32 to 36 mm	Light, plain	Banned	6 months
India, passport	35 x 45 mm	Face 80 to 85%	White	Allowed (no tint)	6 months
China, visa	33 x 48 mm	28 to 33 mm	White / near-white	Allowed (no tint)	6 months
Japan, passport	35 x 45 mm	32 to 36 mm	White / none	Allowed	6 months
Germany, passport	35 x 45 mm (min)	32 to 36 mm (chin-hairline)	Bright, uniform / grey	Allowed	6 months
Ireland, passport	35 x 45 to 38 x 50 mm	Pose-based	Grey / white / cream	Allowed	6 months

Every value is taken from the official government source for that country; the full list of sources and the machine-readable dataset are linked below.

4. The most common reasons photos get rejected

Across the official guidance, the same failures recur:

- Wrong size or head proportion. Using the local default size for a foreign application, or a head that falls outside the country's millimetre band.
- Wrong background. A white background where grey is required, or shadows cast behind the head.
- Glasses glare. Even where glasses are allowed, reflections on the lenses are a frequent rejection; where they are banned (US, Australia), wearing them at all fails.
- Non-neutral expression. Smiling or an open mouth. Every standard we checked requires a neutral expression with the mouth closed.
- Photo too old. Most countries require the photo to have been taken within the last 6 months; the UK is stricter at one month.

5. How to get a photo that passes

The safe approach is to work backwards from the destination country, not your local booth:

1. Confirm the exact size for the country you are applying to, not the one you live in. 35 x 45 mm and 2x2 inches are the two most common, and they are different.
2. Match the background to that country: white for the US, Canada, India and China; grey or cream for the UK, Germany, Australia and Schengen.
3. Remove glasses for a US or Australian photo. Elsewhere, keep them clear and glare-free or remove them to be safe.
4. Keep a neutral expression, mouth closed, eyes open, facing straight ahead, on an evenly lit plain background with no shadows.

Cleanor's free passport photo maker crops and sizes a photo to the country preset you choose and runs entirely in your browser, so the image never leaves your device.

6. Sources and method

We compiled the requirements above from each country's official government source in 2026: the US Department of State (travel.state.gov), UK HM Passport Office (gov.uk), the European Commission and ICAO Doc 9303 for Schengen, Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (canada.ca), the Australian Passport Office (passports.gov.au), Passport Seva India (passportindia.gov.in), the Chinese Visa Application Service Center (visaforchina.cn), Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (mofa.go.jp), the German Federal Foreign Office (germany.info), and Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs (dfa.ie). Where a country publishes ranges or measures the head differently, we reproduced its own wording rather than normalising it. The complete dataset is available as a downloadable CSV. Requirements change; always confirm against the official source before you submit.

7. Frequently asked questions

What size is a passport photo? It depends on the country. The most common size worldwide is 35 x 45 mm (used by the UK, EU, Japan, India, Australia and others), but the United States and India use different formats: the US requires 51 x 51 mm (2 x 2 inches), and Canada uses a larger 50 x 70 mm photo.

Can I use a US passport photo for a UK or European application? No. A US photo is 51 x 51 mm on a white background; the UK and Schengen countries require a 35 x 45 mm photo on a plain grey or cream background. The size and the background are both wrong, so it would be rejected.

Do I have to take my glasses off for a passport photo? Only in some countries. The United States (since 2016) and Australia ban glasses in passport photos. Most other countries, including the UK, Canada, China and the Schengen area, allow clear, non-tinted glasses as long as there is no glare and the frames do not cover the eyes.

What background colour should a passport photo have? White for the United States, Canada, India and China; plain light grey or cream for the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and the Schengen area. Using a white background where grey is required is a common reason UK and German photos are rejected.

Can I take a passport photo at home? Yes, if you match the destination country's exact size, background and rules and use even lighting with no shadows. A tool that applies the correct country preset and crops to the required head size makes this reliable; just confirm the spec against the official government page before submitting.

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